

### Political opportunities of a dialogue on love

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# Love and Politics

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ANDREA PETŐ

## Political opportunities of a dialogue on love

When we say, *horribile dictu*, sing that “Love is in the air” or “All you need is love”, then we all assume to know what it means. We mean the most important, most valuable and also most painful human feeling. The word ‘love’ does not denote the split between *eros*, *filia* and *agape*, or the split between the meanings of ‘szerelem’ (erotic or romantic love) and ‘szeretet’ (filial or familial love). It is difficult to believe but love actually has its own discipline: Love Studies, the science of love. I want to call your attention to the novelty and political opportunities of this approach. Love Studies goes beyond the analysis of discourses and examines the practices and experiences associated with love, which promote the liberation and actualisation of humans. Human in this case is meant in the Nietzschean sense.

The following will be an argumentation for the possibility of love being the code, linguistic and symbolic, for the solution of existing societal problems because it goes beyond former general and encumbered ideological language and party political fault lines to talk about key human questions such as bonding, loyalty, equality, desires and their limits.

## Why do we need liberation?

No reader will deny that power inequalities still exist between men and women in societies, even though constitutions and laws render them formally equal. It is sufficient just to look at statistical indices like the UNDP Gender Inequality Index. There are many answers to the question “why do inequalities survive”. One of these answers refers to the history of love practices, and this is exactly what the authors of this volume analyse from different disciplinary and ideological aspects.

This area of scientific analysis is defined by Jónasdóttir as “political sexuality” (2014: 13). According to her theory love (and I will use this term for simplicity’s sake) is an essential constituent of human life, which cannot be restricted ideologically and normatively to emotional labour leading to reproduction. Love is a human activity, or relationship, which is an alienable and exploitable social force (Jónasdóttir & Ferguson eds. 2014: 13) containing the possibility (I want to underline: it is a possibility and no certainty) of essentially mutual relationship between social subjects of equal standing. Therefore transformational and also emancipatory possibilities are inherent in love, which may even transform the political material practice of our modern days such as politics itself.

This volume is timely also because mainly extreme right-wing and fundamentalist political forces have been using the creative political power of love to further their own political aims. For example, these political forces will deny the freedom potential of love and limit it to motherly love and heteronormative affections of caring. But the social critical and liberating approach to love has always been part of left-wing traditions with the objective of achieving equality. Amongst others, this is what the paper of Gintautas Mažeikis discusses in this volume.

Since the nineties there has been a steady growth in the volume of literature discussed by authors of this volume, looking at love as a form of discourse that renders women oppressed on the level of society and on the micro-level

alike. The economic system of neoliberalism operates on the basis of consumption, and an important element of that is that love has become a project; and the partner in love is predictable, consumable and disposable. Just think about the highly successful television series *Sex in the City*.

Which are the aspects and perspectives for us to look at love? I will rely on the typology of Ann Ferguson and Anna G. Jónasdóttir (2014: 1-11).

The first frame defines love as an ideological form. The first to do so was Mary Wollstonecraft who, thinking about the inequality of women, used this argument as early as during the period of Enlightenment (1792). Alexandra Kollontai defined the romantic heterosexual couple as the ideology of patriarchy and male rule at the beginning of the 20th century. Iconic figures of the second wave of feminism like Simone de Beauvoir (1969) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) emphasised the ideological character of marriage: they saw it as the tool of male dominance.

From this it derives that anyone rejecting this type of normative, romantic love, will necessarily become a political resistance fighter. Adrienne Rich (1976) also follows this path as reflected in modern queer theory that rejects heteronormativity as the tool of social oppression. Early radical and left-wing feminists focus on sexuality as an oppressive or liberating power. What is called “romantic love” in English, and the forms in which it appears in movies and mass culture, have been analysed by media sciences primarily as a tool of the ideology of male rule. I can only repeat: *Sex in the City*. Feminist critique has closely examined the “language of love”, the use of language in the context of love, which can also be seen as a means to sustain capitalism, but it can also be a subversive force to reinterpret societal processes. This is discussed in the article of Justyna Szachowicz-Sempruch.

The second frame is the epistemological and moral philosophical approach that sees love as the indestructible desire to learn about the world and the other person. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum goes to the point in this approach when she says that love depicted in literature teaches us more

about ourselves than about the world around us. Feminist moral philosophers like Sara Ruddick and Carol Gilligan define socially determined love in the form of maternal love (the adjective is important here: maternal love and *not* romantic love). For them the female body is the space of “otherness”, so that they also interpret the female emotional position differently. The connection of this concept of love with the ideas of the new right is interesting. The new right uses the otherness of the female body as an argument; and according to this argumentation heterosexual love is a biological necessity and norm because women love differently than men due to their role in reproduction. This would, in turn, assign a special role and responsibility to women (as mothers) in love.

According to the third frame represented by Luce Irigaray and feminists focusing on difference, there is a phenomenological difference between the two bodies, which is primarily of corporeal nature. This thinking is the same approach as that of Plato to Aristotle, Hegel and Freud, which creates a phallocentric world. (The authors reference them several times in this volume, and Gergely Szilvay also refers to Hegelian feminists.) It puts the male imaginary into the forefront, which reifies the partner. He says “I love you” instead of “I give love to you”. The new theory of love, which is no longer based on hierarchic relations, might change this reification.

In the fourth approach, love has a social, biological and material power. The influential Afro-American lecturer and activist bell hooks argued that it is an avenue to assign power to the disempowered, if we use love in a reinterpreted way. The current system called neoliberal neo-patriarchy also uses the power and force of love; and, according to the argumentation of materialist feminists this is exactly through which we can understand and fight the economics of it. It is the material power of love that this volume attempts to analyse, because we can understand the changes and new polarisation of the recent era, also characterised by the emergence of the new right and fundamentalism, from this aspect only (Kováts & Póim eds.



2015). The new interpreters of love politics are equally present on the left and right of the political spectrum. The studies in this volume demonstrate that there is no such thing as “left-wing” or “right-wing” love. Radical Islam uses religious love for Allah to mobilise. Post-Marxist anarchists like Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri consider revolutionary love to be the new force of social organisation. They vest love with revolutionary power, and take a legal approach. This states that everybody should be entitled to love, which is, in their interpretation beyond capitalism (Hardt & Negri 2009: 179). But love also plays a key role in the politics of feminist anti-capitalistic solidarity. So that there is no more current and complex political question than love.

### **Political possibilities to examine love**

The first possibility is the reinterpretation of Europe. In her book *Europe in Love. Love in Europe* (1999), the Italian historian Luisa Passerini defines love as “dialectic between desire and the impossibility of fusion between lovers, even if this love is fully reciprocated” (1999: 1). I want to underline impossibility in this definition, which includes the conscious undertaking of failure, to which I shall refer back in the context of political creativity.

European love is the love of the troubadour that has been sung by many in many different ways from Tristan and Isolde to Dybbuk, its Jewish version. This shows that the emotions of the relationship of man and a woman based on inequalities and defenselessness influence modern social practices that we live amongst and hand down to our children. The article of Melinda Portik-Bakai in this volume discusses one possible psychological interpretation of this process. Every society is made up from “emotional communities”, which are created by the identical interpretation of the same emotions. Such common emotions may include the experience of a trauma, or the normative preference for joint values like heterosexual love. These create an emotional community, which is also a social mobilising force. It is a real political question

whether and how these “emotional communities” can relate to each other. This is what this collection of essays tries to achieve.

Linking up the concepts of love and Europe firstly does not only mean that European thought is ideological as it builds on Christian courtly love based on hierarchy and spirituality. But it also outlines how Europe-centred attitudes can relate to discourses of love as mentioned above. This is why it is a key question how love itself can question these discursive forms and ideologies, and what political possibilities are there in the non-heteronormative and non-hierarchical interpretation of love.

The second opportunity is inherent in how the issue of love is closely related to the matter of interpreting modernity. Troubadour love determines who can desire to achieve what in society, and how. This definition is even stronger than ever as commoditisation and consumption have strengthened hierarchies even further. Some go even further, like Mary Evans who suggests in her book *Love. An Unromantic Discussion* (2002) that the concept of romantic love should be eradicated completely, not as caretaking and undertaking responsibility, but rather its “romanticised and economic form”.

The third aspect is that religion is fundamentally connected with the concept of love. In his work *Reason, Faith and Revolution* Terry Eagleton states that religion puts “love in the centre of its universe” (2009: 31). But even if love is in the centre of the episteme the followers of religion commit gruesome deeds in its name. In *A Catholic Modernity* Charles Taylor considers Catholic religion a framework, the purpose of which is adherence to good, unconditional love (in the sense of filia) or compassion (1999: 35). This is what András Máté-Tóth and Gabriella Turai discuss in their essay from the perspective of Eros.

And finally the fourth possibility is that of political creativity, which is so direly missing from our current era. Love necessarily leads to change, to something new. This is the area that concerns everyone, where every single citizen could implement his or her principles in practice. This is also why a

left-wing feminist intervention might be important because the tradition of romantic courtly love, and the consumption cult of neoliberal neo-patriarchy manipulates the emotions of all of us. Just as the reference to *Sex and the City* was understood by the readers. It is through love and consumption that global capitalism manages and steers people; and this is why it is a key question how we love. This is the only way for us to rescue the world and thus us. And then indeed: All you need is love.

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